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## The Imam Shahi Isma'ili 'Satpanth': 'The True Path' Threatened

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**The Imam Shahi Isma'ili 'Satpanth': 'The True Path' Threatened by Hindutva Juggernaut**

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**Yoginder Sikand**

Centuries of interaction between Islam and local Indian religious traditions have given birth to a number of reformist sects, new communities and liminal groups that cannot be neatly classified in any sense as unambiguously either 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. In terms of numbers and influence one of the largest of such groups are the Imam Shahis, who number almost a million and are scattered in various parts of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Unique in terms of its harmonious blending of Hindu and Muslim forms and concepts, the Imam Shahi tradition, or Satpanth ('The True Path') as its followers call it, is today under grave threat today as right-wing Hindutva groups seek to forcibly absorb it into the amorphous Hindu fold.

The origins of the Imam Shahi sect can be traced back to the twelfth century, when the Isma'ili Shi'a Muslim missionary, Hazrat Sayyed Shamsuddin, more popularly known as Pir Shams, Shamas Rishi or Nur

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Satgur ('the light of the True Guru'), arrived in Patan, in Gujarat, from Syria in the reign of the king Siddharaja Jayasingha [1094-1143]. He made numerous converts to the Isma'ili faith, which he sought to interpret in local Hindu terms, giving it the name of Satpanth or 'the true path'. He is credited with the conversion of Siddharaja Jayasingha and a large number of Hindus belonging to the Lohana trading caste. The ruler of the neighbouring kingdom of Dharanagari, Raja Surchand, is also said to have become his disciple, and to have given his daughter, Palande, to him in marriage.

Fourth in line of succession from Pir Shams was Pir Sadraddin al-Hussaini, also known by the Hindu names of Baba Guru ('The Great Teacher'), Sahadev and Harichand. Like Pir Shams, Pir Sadraddin also clothed his Isma'ili Shi'a doctrines in Hindu terms, writing numerous sacred texts known as *ginans*, which represent a curious blend of Hindu Bhakti and Isma'ili Shi'a concepts and beliefs. The most important of his works was the *Das Avatar* or 'the ten incarnations', in which the stories of the nine incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu are related and then Vishnu's tenth avatar is presented in the form of 'Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, the first Imam of the Shi'as and the fourth Caliph of the Sunnis. This blend of Hindu and isma'ili motifs is also strikingly evident in another of Pir Sadraddin's works, *Chhatis Crore*, where reference is made to the Hindu concept of the four ages (*yugas*) and to the millions of souls that are said to have been saved in earlier ages by the Hindu religious figures Raja Harishchandra and Yudhishtira and of a similar number who have attained salvation in the present age of evil by following the Isma'ili Satpanth.

Pir Sadraddin stridently opposed the ritualism associated with popular religious practice as well as caste oppression, and this accounted, in large measure, for the popularity of the Satpanth among the 'lower' and trading castes. In his *Sakhi Samrani Granth* ('The Book of Good Advice Worthy of Remembrance'), he writes of the falsity of soulless ritualism, and creatively interprets the Brahminical 'holy' thread as 'a hundred *kiriyas* [noble deeds]' instead. 'Only those

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who attain communion with the guru Brahma-ji are the real Brahmins', he declares in a biting critique of the caste system, adding that 'such people alone are those who know the *brahmgyan*' or knowledge of the Divine mysteries.

Pir Sadruddin died at Ucch Sharif in Bahawalpur in southern Punjab in 1380, and was succeeded by his son, Pir Hasan Kabiruddin. Like his father, Pir Kabiruddin was the author of numerous *ginans*, which, again, represent a striking synthesis of Hindu and Islamic concepts. Thus, in his *Anant Akhado*, he equates Allah with the Hindu Ishvar, Muhammad with 'Guru Brahma', and Fatima, daughter of Muhammad, with Sita, wife of Ram. All these figures, he says, were 'the perfect ones of their age'. He also speaks of the Qur'an as being the fourth and final Veda, the *Atharva Veda*, and of India, which he refers to by the Sanskrit name Jambudwipa, as being the final meeting place for all the holy men of the world. He also uses the same name to refer to the 'eternal home' of the soul that has attained salvation. Each verse of the lengthy poem ends with the distinctly Hindu cry of *Hari Anant!* Or God, the Eternal!

Pir Kabiruddin insisted that the Satpanth that he preached 'encompassed all paths to God' and that the 'Husband' or God 'plays mysteriously in many forms'. Elsewhere, the Pir expressed this understanding of the oneness of humankind thus:

O Lord! The Hindus and Muslims are together one being

The Lord has simply given them different forms and shapes

Without real recognition of this fact all is darkness

O Lord! You are the Eternal One.

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Pir Kabiruddin died at Ucch and immediately after there was a split in the ranks of the Satpanthis over the matter of succession to his leadership. Those who chose to follow his brother, Pir Tajuddin, later went on to form what is today known as the Khoja Isma'ili sect, today more popularly known as the Aga Khanis, followers of the Aga Khan. The others, who pledged allegiance to his youngest son Imam Shah, became known as Imam Shahis.

Born in the middle of the fifteenth century, Imam Shah was nineteen when his father died. In order to be appointed as the leader of the Isma'ili Satpanthis in India after his father's death, Imam Shah travelled to Iran to meet the head of the Isma'ilis, Imam Muhammad bin Islam Shah. He, however, was not successful in his mission, as Imam Muhammad had already appointed his uncle Tajuddin to the post. Imam Shah then returned to Gujarat, accompanied by his favourite disciple Hazir Beg. Gradually, he won a large following among the peasant castes in the region, who came to see him as a saint.

According to popular lore, once Imam Shah was stopped by a Sunni *maulvi*, who demanded to know why he did not pray five times a day. Instead of replying, Imam Shah is said to have made the minaret of the local mosque bend in prayer to him, thus suggesting the superiority of inner prayer to outwardly forms, a key Satpanthi Imam Shahi belief. When the Sunni Muslim Sultan of Gujarat, Mahmud Begda [149-1511], heard of this, he called Imam Shah to the royal court at Ahmedabad and decided to test his piety by serving him cat's meat to eat. On Imam Shah's call, it is said, the cat jumped out alive and ran away. He then turned to the Sultan and said: 'Now you are lost [begda]'. It is from this incident that the Sultan got his epithet.

According to the story, Imam Shah later forgave the Sultan for his insolence. The Sultan offered to empty his treasury for him, but he declined, accepting only a simple bullock cart from him. Sitting on the cart,

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Imam Shah left Ahmedabad and, crossing the Sabarmati river, arrived at the village of Giramtha. It is said that here he performed so many miracles that the villagers, all of whom became his disciples, insisted that he settle down there. From that time onwards, the village began to be known as Pirana or 'the coming of the Pir'.

Like the Satpanthi Pirs before him, Imam Shah sought to preach the Isma'ili religion by expressing it in Hindu forms so as to make it more easily intelligible to the local populace. Thus, he taught that Nur Satgur, the first of the Isma'ili Pirs in Gujarat, was none other than Brahma, that he himself was Indra or 'Sayyed Sadguru Patra Brahma Indra Imam Shah', and that his son, Nur Muhammad Shah, was an avatar of Vishnu.

Imam Shah died in 1513, and was buried at an imposing mausoleum at Pirana, some ten miles from Ahmedabad. In his lifetime he had five principle disciples: Hazir Beg, Bhabha Ram, Naya Kaka, Shana Kaka and Chichi Bai. In his will, Imam Shah had left detailed instructions for them, ordering all, except for Shana Kaka, to settle away from Pirana. He also instructed his son Nur Muhammad Shah to assume the leadership of the community. Nur Muhammad was married to the daughter of Mahmud Shah Begda, the Sultan of Gujarat, from whom he had two sons, Sayyed Mustafa and Sayyed Shahabuddin. Their descendants are known as the Imam Shahi Sayyeds, and they have inherited the establishment at Pirana. Imam Shah also had another son, Sayyed Khan, from his marriage with the daughter of Punja Singh, a Rajput from Bhavnagar. The descendants of Sayyed Khan, known as Sayyed Khanis, later went on to form their own sect with their centre at Navsari. Nur Muhammad died in 1534 and was also buried at Pirana.

Over time, the Imam Shahi sect expanded across large parts of present-day Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Many of those who joined the sect, mostly from the peasant Patel/Kunbi community, remained outwardly Hindu, retaining their Hindu

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customs, dress and culture. They were known variously as Kutchi Patels, Matia Kanbis or Gupti Momins or 'secret believers'. The leadership of the community reflected this Hindu-Muslim synthesis: both the unambiguously 'Muslim' Imam Shahi Sayyeds and the externally 'Hindu' Gupti Momin Kakas of Pirana were considered the rightful heirs of the legacy of Imam Shah by his followers.

In recent years, the Hindu right-wing has witnessed a tremendous growth in Gujarat. This has been accompanied by relentless attacks on Muslims, as well as Christians, and efforts by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad to convert local non-Hindu groups to Hinduism. All this has not left the Imam Shahis of Pirana unaffected. They, too, are now victims of forces that seem well beyond their control. Influential people connected with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad are now attempting to completely change the character of the Pirana shrine, and along with it, the Imam Shahi cult itself.

The matter has now reached the courts, with a group of Imam Shahis of Pirana accusing the present Kaka or administrator and managing trustee of the Imam Shah Bawa Roza Trust, Karsankaka Saujikaka, of attempting to convert the tomb of Imam Shah into a Hindu temple. In their petition to the Gujarat High Court, they have accused the Gujarat government authorities of 'turning a blind eye' to the matter and the Gujarat Charities' Commissioner of 'colluding with' the Kaka to prevent the Imam Shahis, both Hindus as well as Muslims, 'from professing, practising and propagating' their traditional rituals by Hinduising them. This, they say, is tantamount to an illegal interference with the religious rights of the one thousand families who are descended from Imam Shah, the five thousand 'staunch followers [of the Imam], both Hindus as well as Muslims' and the almost one million 'Darshanarthis' of Imam Shah, who belong to various different religious communities.

According to the petitioners, the administration of the Pirana shrine or *dargah* was smoothly carried out

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jointly by the Imam Shahi Sayyeds and the Gupti Momin Kakas for more than five centuries. In 1939 the shrine was made into a public trust, and it was to be managed by the Kaka as the administrator, who was to be appointed jointly by the Muslim Sayyeds and the Hindu followers of Imam Shah. The *dargah*, say the petitioners, was maintained 'in accordance with full Islamic procedure', with a mosque functioning in the *dargah* complex.

The present Kaka, the twenty-eighth in succession, was appointed to the post in 1986. According to the petitioners, this Kaka continued with the traditional, largely Islamic, practices of the *dargah* till 1990. From then, they allege, he 'started acting arbitrarily', 'using trust property as if it was his own', and 'tampering with the religious rites of the community—an integral part of their religion'. He replaced some of these traditional practices 'with new rites and customs which are unknown to the faith of the Satpanthis'.

Among these subtle changes that the present Kaka, who is believed to be close to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, is accused of having made is Hinduising the literature of the Imam Shah is by removing the Muslim symbols of the crescent and star in the holy books of the sect and replacing them by the Hindu 'Om', and introducing in them what he has termed as *Satpanth Yagna Vidhi* or Brahminical mantras for sacrifices'. The petitioners argue that the authentic Imam Shahi Satpanthi tradition actually has no concept whatsoever of such sacrifices or *yagnas*. In the literature that the present Kaka has published, the Pirana *dargah*, as it has traditionally been known, is referred to, instead, as the *Prerana Pith*, the word *pith* being the term used for a Brahminical centre of pilgrimage. The Kaka, who now describes himself as Acharya Karsandasji Maharaj, is also accused of transforming the building containing the *dholia*, the bed of Imam Shah, into a Hindu temple, installing idols of Vishnu and Ganesh inside. Further, he has also reportedly ordered the discontinuing of the practice of reading the *fatiha*, the opening verse of the Quran, at the *dargah* and has also cut off the water and electricity supplies to the mosque inside the *dargah*

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complex.

The petitioners state that a large number of Imam Shahis, both Muslims as well as Hindus, 'have come out to protest, opposing the virtual conversion of the shrine' by the Kaka. Yet, they say, the government has done nothing to redress the issue. And, it appears, if the Kaka and his backers continue to have their way, this unique Ismaili tradition will soon be on the brink of extinction.

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